

Obama banks on TPPA as leverage for better governance

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While expressing deep concern on the increasing curbs on civil liberties, and corruption being "pervasive", US President Barack Obama seems to view the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) as leverage.

Without the TPPA, it is status quo. We can express our concerns - and we will - but our influence is limited, he says. The TPPA is a legally binding document, it provides financial incentives for improved governance. It's a tool to hold governments accountable, he stressed during a [meeting with civil society groups](#) on Saturday.

But not all were convinced. Ambiga Sreenevasan argued that the TPPA gives more protection to the pharmaceutical industry than existing under the current World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreement on intellectual property (TRIPS), which she argued was unnecessary and counter to public health concerns.

Characterising himself as a left of centre progressive politician, Obama noted that there are dissenters even within the Democratic Party. He has had a difficult time convincing them to back the trade agreement. Globalisation is here to stay, it has been going on for 20 years, it is how you manage it, he argued. He said the TPPA is far better than previous agreements, with clauses on the environment, labour standards and corruption.

Obama certainly came across as personally invested in the trade agreement. It is apparent that he will fight to get it through the US Congress and signed in New Zealand coming February. It will stand as a legacy of his presidency, for better or worse.

Interaction with Najib

Bersih's Maria Chin brought up Obama's support for Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, and that such public support creates a perception of endorsing Najib's actions against civil society and human rights.

Obama said that he does not "endorse" Najib or any particular country's leadership. We have bilateral relationships, where we work on common issues; it is part of government-to-government relationships. Part of that relationship is to voice our concern on civil liberties and human rights. We will put a spotlight on such issues, he said. "Don't think we can't do both," he added.

Obama was well-briefed on the current situation with regard to press freedom, challenges to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. He acknowledged *Malaysiakini* as a well-recognised media. He asked the US ambassador in Malaysia to ensure that the US speaks up if journalists and media organisations are threatened for doing their jobs.

Civil society leaders also brought up the issue of trafficking of persons, widespread corruption, 1MDB, interference with investigations in the form of the removal of the attorney-general, undermining of the Public Accounts Committee and interference with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission investigations, the government endorsement of racist speeches and gatherings, as well as other issue.

A recent Pew Research Centre [survey](#) found 11 percent of Malaysians supportive of Islamic State (IS), second highest in the world after Nigeria. A weakened leadership is opening the door to militancy.

Obama was generally sympathetic and concerned, and alluded that the US has and will continue to raise these matters with the Malaysian government, but at the same time cannot be seen to be interfering with domestic affairs.

On the whole, it is clear that the US president's hands are tied. Currently he is focused on building institutions that can sustain change over the long term. He suggested that as a

private citizen after his presidency he would have more elbow room to engage civil society and matters close to his heart.

It signalled that it is really up to Malaysians to drive change locally, and to be creative and build key alliance to create that change.

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